

At a time when over six hundred elected Constituent Assembly members hold the country's future in their hands, every citizen can also hold the health of their family in their hands, with a small bar of soap. October 15, 2008, has been declared the first-ever Global Handwashing Day by the UN General Assembly. Nepal's government and other hygiene and sanitation development professionals have joined hands to celebrate handwashing across Nepal.



Washing hands with water alone is not enough! Hands are the principal carriers of disease-causing germs. Many people mistakenly think that removing the visible dirt is sufficient to make hands clean. But washing with soap is significantly more effective than with water alone for breaking down and dislodging the dirt that carries most germs. It is among the most effective ways to prevent diarrheal disease and pneumonia, which together are responsible for the majority of child deaths in the world.

Here in Nepal, analysis of the Nepal Demographic Health Survey suggests that about 2,200 children die from acute diarrhea and about 10,900 from diarrhea and respiratory disease combined each year. According to the research conducted by the Nepal Nutrition Intervention Project, the mortality rate among newborn babies drops by 41% when birth attendants and mothers use soap to wash their hands.

Global Handwashing day gives welcome recognition to the efforts of Nepal's community health volunteers, health workers and school children who are playing a critical role in promoting handwashing with soap. However, greater awareness is sorely needed at the household level. An initial survey by the Hygiene Improvement Project, carried out by UNICEF Nepal and funded by USAID from 2004-7, identified that 64% of mothers typically washed their hands with soap after defecation or cleaning a child's bottom, but only 20% before cooking and 30% before eating or feeding a child.

Soap is also a cost-effective health intervention. Adding soap decreases the risk of disease even when families do not have access to clean water and basic sanitation. Likewise, UNICEF has found that schools with latrines and handwashing facilities are a highly effective setting for teaching children who then go on to share the message with their families and communities.

Global Handwashing Day, the 15th of October, in the midst of Nepal's festival season, is a good day to commit to improving your family's health through hygiene. Merely washing hands with soap could prevent diarrhea and pneumonia suffering for about two hundred and fifty thousand children each year here in Nepal.

Beth S. Paige,

Clean hands save lives!

Thursday, 11 September 2008 15:40

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